Lock the Last Door

Pharaoh Syndicate Investigations, Volume 0.1

Vincent Lore

Published by Vincent Lore, 2025.

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

LOCK THE LAST DOOR

First edition. April 11, 2025.

Copyright © 2025 Vincent Lore.

Written by Vincent Lore.

Further Reading: Friend of the Damned

Lock the Last Door

GUESS IT WAS AFTER midnight when I reached the house. Hard to tell, with a broken watch in my coat and broken lights on every corner. Not a car on the streets, not a soul in my sight. Unsurprising. Arkham was safer after dark than New York City, but not by much. The local syndicate kept a curfew and most were smart enough to obey it, but I'd never been smart.

I'd never been lucky, either.

It wasn't an old house, by Arkham standards. Not a gable roofed relic nor a sturdy stone monument but a tidy, high-roofed thing, with a front porch and windows on both floors. Once it'd been loved, I'm sure, but like most humans I've met, its cheer had faded with age and abuse. Cracks instead of curtains in the windows. An old rotten fence, the gate broken open. The front door, twitching and shaking on its hinges, half open to me already.

Somewhere, not too far away, music played, too far away to catch all the notes, but familiar all the same. Nostalgic as childhood sunshine, and just as bittersweet.

I sighed.

"It's going to be a bad night, isn't it?" I said.

No one replied.

I made it halfway up the porch steps before I saw it. A thick little pile stacked up and glimmering in the moonlight. I paused, my bad hand shaking from how hard it clenched. Soap bubbles, I thought, iridescent and wet, right in front of the door. Like a

child played there before coming in at their mother's call, leaving only memories and residue behind.

This was a business trip I was on. When the lady entered Keller and Queen's, frantic to find her runaway son, my boss thrust her case onto me. He'd been giddy with relief, babbling about how this job would be easy, how all it needed was 'a woman's understanding'. The poor woman didn't get it, even after I opened my mouth to interview her. Through the door, I saw Carmine struggling not to laugh at her desk as our boss made a fool of himself, her sweet dark face twisted with amusement.

Yeah, there are two people in the whole city who never fail to treat me as a man. Carmine's one of them.

Looking at those soap bubbles, listening to that music floating through the air, something in me ached. What I would've done to have her with me. Carmine and I are a hell of a team. You get used to having a partner on jobs, and when they're gone, it's like you've lost a limb. But she needed sleep. And frankly, so did I.

I looked closer at the bubbles. They didn't move in the breeze, oil slick rainbows shimmering on every one. Did the kid make that mess? At fifteen he seemed a little old to play that kind of game. Maybe there were other kids with him. The thought made me grimace, pinch the bridge of my nose with my good hand. Fantastic, I thought. Just what I needed, a bunch of rowdy little bastards to try and send home.

I shook my head, stepped forward and grabbed for the door knob.

The bubbles cracked under my boot like a hundred tiny bones.

I recoiled. It should've been like stepping on nothing, but instead it felt like I'd stepped on a thousand thin wooden sheets. Not a single one remained, the whole thing burst apart, leaving a murky ooze weeping onto the porch planks. An awful stench rushed towards me, I almost gagged. Smelled like an injured animal. Like my childhood cat as he recovered from a fight. Wet skin, wet fur, blood, plasma. I swore.

I raised my head and stared into the darkness of the house. Not as dark as it should've been. The entryway had those same bubbles all over the walls. They clung together, stuck to the corners, the ceiling, motionless and translucent and impossible. And glowing, pulsing with gentle light, each and every little orb.

I left the front door open behind me.

Compact little place it was, stairs to the right, parlor to the left, dining room behind it, kitchen dead ahead. So I guessed. No doors to get in the way of seeing what awaited in each room, but there wasn't much awaiting. The flowered wallpaper around me faded years ago to a sickly, peeling green, and the floor glinted wet-shiny without a drop of water on its surface. That was about it. No paintings, no rugs, no furniture in sight. The place stood empty as a man's soul.

The music played on, louder.

Where the hell was it coming from? Could it be a neighbor somewhere?

Every step I took sounded too loud, drowning out that cheerful, sunny melody. I didn't like this. I'd seen bad things in Arkham before but this music, it felt - I couldn't put a finger on it. Maybe I didn't want to. Didn't matter. The kitchen might have a back door. Most houses did in this town. I could poke my head

out there, get a feel for things, get back to work. It would nag at me until I did.

Why did the kid I was looking for even come to this rundown heap?

Crossed into the kitchen and my face wrinkled. God, that stench. Absolutely foul. Like the broken mass of bubbles, but worse in an indescribable way. The window let in a little moonlight, but there wasn't much to see. Somebody ripped out everything of interest or use a long time ago, even the sink. Not even trash in that old place. But there were the bubbles, clinging to a small door on the far side of the room. I told myself to get used to seeing them. I knew I wouldn't.

For all my complaints about the rest of the room, the back door looked great. Perfect condition, not boarded up or anything. And the music played on, even louder in here. I grinned. I'd figure out that tune soon as I stepped outside. I wrapped my good hand around the doorknob.

A gun clicked behind me.

"Don't move."

I held my breath.

"Someone's up late," that familiar voice said. "Come back to the scene of the crime? Turn around and show me your hands, let me see who's sneaking about on Syndicate property."

Exhaling, I turned, raising up my hands.

"Hello, Harlan," I said.

Harlan Thompson kept the gun trained on me, but his face twisted into grim resignation.

"God damn it, Core," he said. "You again?"

I smiled without humor.

"And this time it wasn't even on purpose."

Never lowering the pistol, he closed the distance. One hand shoved me back against the door, hard enough I grunted in pain. The barrel of the gun jabbed right over my heart. Harlan glared down at me.

"Of all the people to run into tonight," he said in a low voice. "Seems I can't do anything in this town anymore without meeting you."

I didn't break eye contact, even as a shiver rushed down my spine.

"Nice to see you too," I said.

He pressed the gun harder into my chest. I hissed with pain. Harlan smiled, cold as January. Some could say he missed his calling. Could say he should've been in the movies alongside all those beautiful people. He's twice my age, and shows it, but I don't doubt he could've been one of those beautiful people if he'd wanted it. Him, with his fair skin and those eyes of his, bright and shocking blue. With his face he'd get any role the studios could dream up - the lover, the hero, the angel.

Harlan wasn't any of the things. Harlan was a criminal, the worst of his kind. He ran the Pharaoh Syndicate, and he ruled Arkham with blood soaked hands.

And despite it all, *my* blood wasn't on them yet.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you don't sleep," Harlan said. "What are you doing, running around at this hour, again?"

"I'm working," I said.

Harlan raised an eyebrow. "Get lost on the way to your office?"

"I'm looking for someone." I said.

Harlan tilted his head. The gun shifted against my chest. I didn't move.

"A runaway," I said. "His mother hired me to find him. Name's-"

His lips twitched. "Let me guess: Five feet something? White, reddish hair? Birthmark on his hand? Turning 16 in three months?"

I didn't speak. He smiled.

"That's what I thought," he said.

He grabbed my gun before I could make a move for it. I felt him slide it out of my holster, his hand warm near my chest. His smile grew, and something deep inside me jolted with fear, much as anything, I guess. Harlan dragged the gun up over my body, past where his own still rested. The cold metal kissed my throat. I had to fight myself to keep that eye contact.

"Is the kid alive?" I asked.

He never looked away from me, and his smile never changed.

"You're the detective," he said, "What do you think?"

I swallowed and felt my skin move against the end of my gun. We stood like that, I don't know how long. I just know, I looked away first.

"What do you want from me?" I said.

Harlan pulled his gun away. I heard him slip it back into his holster. Heard keys clicking between his fingers before I ever got a glimpse of them. His arm pressed against my side, warm. The door locked. He dropped the keys back in his pocket, and that smile never went away once.

He gripped me hard enough to bruise.

"C'mere," he said. "Let me show you something."

I expected to be dragged out of the building with how he hauled me around. He could've, but he didn't. We took a sharp turn into the parlor instead. I glanced at the front door, still open

on its hinges, but didn't go for it. I can't outrun bullets. Or Harlan. I've tried.

Put politely, I was in deep trouble. Harlan had my gun and a vice grip on my good arm. Nobody would hear a thing if he shot me now, and nobody would find me in this place if he did, not even Carmine. Carmine, god. If something happened to me, what would Harlan do to her?

That music still played from somewhere. For a second, I could've sworn it was even louder now.

He shoved me, so hard I stumbled, into the center of the parlor. It must've been a parlor, or some other fancy word for it, with the decorations curling around the doors and windows. Must've looked nice before the dust and rot took over. The bubbled masses hung overhead, draped around the windows, casting their eerie light over the room, and the scattered scraps of wood lying on the floor.

Harlan stalked forward.

"I did a little research on this place before I came here," he said. My gun, he still pointed it at me. "I know all about it. Who built it, who owned it, who rented it, and where they all are now. I learned how much it cost to build, to buy, and leave. And you know what I found interesting?"

I didn't move. He laughed.

"Not a damn thing!"

He gestured with my gun towards a door at the back of the room.

"Nothing that could explain *that*, at least."

I followed the gesture, bracing myself. Through that old doorway, nothing but darkness waited. Nothing moved. I knew

better than to get closer, but I did. I had no other choice but to creep closer and look deeper into that darkness.

Suppose it was a dining room, once. The table left in there sure was the right size for the job. I could see it all because of the bubbled masses coating the walls, and that uneasy, pulsing light. They clung to the ceiling, except for a large circle in the middle of it all. In the center of that circle, liquid dripped, one heavy drop at a time, onto the table.

It'd never been a pretty table, even when it was first made. Rough and square with four awkward, undersized legs, each carved into rounded, bulging swirls. Those carvings must've been gold once, but now they'd decayed into a dingy, lifeless yellow. The paint soaked the entire table, from the flat surface to the legs and the floor around it. Molten, shimmering blue, the paint splattered onto the tabletop, on the fallen candles, the tiny old bones and thin slices of metal, and the book.

That book was a lost cause. Small enough for one hand, by now it'd swollen into a wet sludge of pulp and leather, ink and paint, the words long melted off the page. You'd never be able to read it now but I could guess what it'd been: another goddamn homemade spell book.

I stepped closer towards the scene. A hand grabbed my shoulder and yanked me back into Harlan's chest.

"Ah-ah," he teased. "I'm not gonna make it that easy on you. No snooping around in here. You won't need to anyway."

His hand squeezed my shoulder, his breath rushed against my ear.

"What do you think?" he asked. "A spell gone wrong, or just as planned? Done by an amateur, or an idiot? Don't be shy, tell

me what you think. It's normal for humans to be wrong about things."

This time I did try to jerk away. What I thought was going to happen, I can't say, but he didn't flinch and he didn't let me go.

"I'm not playing this game with you," I said. "I'm not part of your sick occult bullshit."

Harlan laughed. With slow deliberation, he pulled me closer, close enough I felt his lips against my ear.

"You've been involved with my work from day one," he whispered. "You think you can play ignorant? I know better. You're learning, Lazarus. You pretend otherwise but I see the truth. You're learning every day you live in my town. And someday, you'll have to choose: use the knowledge for yourself, or be devoured by it."

He twisted us away from that grim scene and with both hands shoved me back into the parlor. This time I did hit the floor, tripping over a chunk of wood and missing one of the disgusting masses by a breath. I forced myself upwards and looked back at him. He smiled down at me, and ran his thumb up and down over my gun.

"Well?" He said. "Now what?"

I needed a moment, looking away, closing my eyes. Some kind of terror thrilled through my body, and I couldn't think. But I breathed, forced it down, made myself think. I couldn't leave. He had my gun. But he wanted an answer that I didn't want to give him. He wanted an answer that I didn't want to give myself.

Yet he didn't just have my gun, did he? He had the kid I was looking for, and my stupid curiosity, too.

It's another case, I told myself as I forced myself back to my feet. Just another case like all the others I've done in this town.

I turned, looked Harlan in the eye.

"Something weird about that water," I said. "Could be a hole in the roof. It did rain the other night."

"Doesn't smell like rainwater," he said. My gun in his hand, trained at me again. "But it doesn't smell like much else, either, does it?"

"So, second floor." I said. "Might find some answers there."

He gestured towards the entry with my gun.

"Lead the way."

The music didn't stop. It played on and on, longer than I'd expect a normal melody to. I looked up into the shadows of the second floor, the stairs silent under my feet. The music grew louder with every step up I took.

I glanced back at Harlan. "Do you hear that?"

"Keep moving, kid," he said.

Hard to argue with a man holding a gun.

Second floor, dark and empty as a fresh coffin. The bubbled masses clung to every last corner, lighting up the dark. A closet had been swallowed up by the damn things, could hardly see the opening through their shifting, iridescent forms. As Harlan came up behind me, I paused to listen to that music.

I knew that music. I had to. Like an itch in my mind I couldn't scratch, a memory slipping out of reach. The music played on.

In the darkness, something breathed.

How I didn't see them soon as I looked around, I don't know. Maybe my mind tried to protect me, but I doubt I'd ever show myself that much mercy, even by instinct. Maybe they just blend-

ed into the walls, into the dark, so well, I couldn't help but miss them. But Harlan's shadow shifted just right to catch my eye. To let me follow the glint of pulsing light on those... things.

Don't think they were alive, not like humans are, but they weren't *not* alive, either. Those fat lumps of flesh clinging to the walls. Flesh, that's not the right word but, what else can I call it? They weren't rocks or plants or mold, even, but something I had never seen before. Soft, white as old bone, with hardened streaks of color running through them. Each one bore a strange, small hollow in the center.

And they breathed. With every breath, the veins flexed and glowed, red fading to blue and back. With every breath, the soft tissue stretched wide around those hard veins, and sagged with the sound of an inhale.

There were hundreds of them, all over the walls. Some the size of my fist. Some the size of my thumbnail. But the biggest ones hugged the door leading to the room over the dining room.

Somehow, I figured I should've guessed it wouldn't be that easy.

"Nasty little fucks," Harlan whispered behind me.

"What are they?" I whispered.

"Not from Earth," he said. "That's about all I can say."

Between the breaths, the music danced. My eyes closed. An image floated through my mind, like remembering a dream, of people dancing, laughing, singing to that haunting song. If I just waited long enough, if I just listened long enough, the memory would crack open, and I'd remember-

Something hard jabbed me in the side. I just about jumped out of my skin, reached for a gun I didn't have anymore. Harlan cackled.

"Don't lose yourself on me now," he said, leaning towards my face. "You've got so much potential."

I glared at him. Bastard. But maybe he had a point. Something about that music, the way it sunk into my mind. That was familiar, as familiar as the music itself. I couldn't let it get to me. Not if I wanted to get through this alive.

I looked at the door. The only relief I had was not feeling anything looking back at me.

Not an inch of light got into that room. The masses must've been in there once, I could smell them. Something must've burst them all and taken their light with them. But I didn't need the light to know what waited. The windows, the walls, the ceiling, all covered by those breathing things. I could hear them. That deep, groaning sound, every breath like the last gasp of a dying man. In those shadows, the things looked massive. Bigger than my fist, bigger than my head. In that abyssal darkness, they breathed. And maybe, I thought, they grew, too.

Things were easier to see by my feet. One of them sat close enough to the door for me to see all of it. The hollow in its body stretched wider than the ones outside, almost to the very bottom of its form. In that hollow, a tiny mouth with blunt, clenching teeth, opening, closing, with each godforsaken breath.

I couldn't look away. I stared as something inched from between the tiny teeth. A dark, jerking thing, moving as if every inch contained a doll's joint. It dropped to the floor, and in the light cast by the rest of it, it seemed covered in hundreds of tiny barbs and discolored pimples. Twitching, writhing, it stretched towards the door, towards my feet.

I stepped back but Harlan moved forward. He slammed his boot down onto the foul thing. It broke in two, part under his

boot, part exposed. A horrible smell, like rotten fish, rushed towards us. The meaty squelch seemed to swallow up the silence.

The silence. The breathing stopped. The remainder of the flesh thing slammed back into the jaws, and the thing itself stopped moving. Silence stretched, from the room, between the two of us. The thing, the tongue or tendril, still twitched and squirmed under Harlan's foot. With a grunt, he kicked it back into the darkness.

"Disgusting animals," He hissed.

I backed away, not from the darkness, but from Harlan. His gaze raised towards me, and he smiled.

The music played on.

"Alright," I said at last. "The leak isn't in there."

"No, the ceiling looks intact to me," Harlan said, glancing back into the room.

I looked at the other room next to us. Another bedroom, I guessed. What did I expect to find? More of those swollen things, I guess. And I was right. Some clung to the corner of the back wall.

But there was a door on the other side of the room. A door to a balcony, I guessed. I could only see darkness through it, but it seemed a more welcoming dark than the hideous room I'd just seen. A friendly darkness, just like the melody that swam through it. So sweet, like candy, heavy, unmistakable.

I could just go out there and see where the music was coming from. It would be so easy.

"There you are," Harlan purred. He shoved me aside. The keys jingled in his hand as he strode towards that door. I almost called for him to stop, but logic, ice cold logic, settled over me, lodged in my throat.

It would've been so easy to go through that door.

The lock clicked.

The music stopped.

Or maybe I just couldn't hear it anymore.

Some inside me ached like a wound in the silence. I stared at Harlan, almost making the words work, almost asking, *what the hell was that about?*

But he was quicker. He leaned against the door behind him and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Any ideas?" He gestured with his head towards the room next to us.

I frowned. My pulse beat in my ears. I let the music go.

"There's no water in there," I said. "But that doesn't mean there's no water in the building."

"Oh?"

"I can't imagine this place getting running water anymore, but there was a sink downstairs," I said. "Maybe there's a leak in the pipes somewhere."

"Somewhere like the ceiling of the dining room?" he said, raising his eyebrows.

"I heard a lot of houses this old don't have plumbing on the second floor in this town. But I guess progress comes even to Arkham, eventually."

Turning on my heel, I headed towards the third door, right across from the stairwell.

Even considering the rest of the place, the bathroom wasn't much to look at. White walls, white sink, whitewashed floor. Nothing else. No masses, no creatures, the moonlight fighting through the dirty window, and me. The mirror, somehow, was still intact.

I frowned at myself. The sink felt cold under my hands. I stared into my reflection, at my tired eyes, my sagging hair beneath my hat. How did it come to this? Was this what I'd wanted my whole life?

"Do you ever feel like you're wearing a mask?" I said aloud.

"What?" Harlan asked.

"Because if you took it off, everyone would see who you really were?" I said.

I felt him staring at me, but I didn't look away from the mirror.

"Just turn on the damn faucet, Core," Harlan said.

I smiled, and in the reflection, it looked like me.

I twisted the knob on the sink.

Something banged, loud, and banged again, louder.

I can't forget the noise that followed. That agonized, inhuman scream. Long and scraping against my ears, rushing up from the floor beneath us.

"Turn it off!" Harlan shouted.

I twisted the knob off. Not a drop of water came out. The screaming cut into silence, and with a muffled thud, thud, thud, everything went quiet.

Harlan swore, but I ignored him, and the strange occult language he used yet again. My gaze dragged up from the sink, to the mirror. My eyes. I couldn't stand the way my eyes looked. I turned my head towards Harlan. He'd straightened up. He stared at me.

"You looked through all the information on this house," I said, "and found nothing."

He blinked, as if I'd somehow caught him off guard.

"That's right," Harlan said.

"But that," I said, "doesn't mean you don't know exactly what happened here already."

A grin broke over his face, he chuckled. "I know everything that happens in this town. Doesn't matter if I'm told or not. Nobody keeps secrets from me, even when they try."

"So you don't *need* my help..."

"But I want it," he said.

"Why?"

"Because tonight would be a lot less fun without you," Harlan said.

I grit my teeth, but my glare only seemed to amuse him. Turning away, I shook my head. Took my hat off, ran my good hand through my hair, and put my hat back on. I slammed my shoulder against his as I pushed back into the hall.

The last room, the largest one, glowed. Tumorous bubbles hung from the ceiling, shivering as I passed beneath them. Moonlight illuminated me, my coat, my hands, my shadow stretching over the floor. I shoved my hat over my eyes and paced. Harlan watched me, and said nothing. I was the one that broke the silence.

"This wasn't an accident," I said.

"Oh?"

"Whoever did this, didn't screw up. They did exactly what they planned."

"Really," Harlan said.

"Magic," the word tasted odd and foul in my mouth, but I said it anyway, "Magic is more dangerous than any loaded gun. More deadly than a bomb. If this was an accident, even if you'd had a swarm of people here, cleaning up the residue, I'd figure out what happened."

I stared at him.

"But why?

"Why... what, exactly?" Harlan said, leaning against the doorframe.

"Why did they leave it like that? *Who* left it like that?" I said. "Because it wasn't you. That's not the kind of game you play."

"I'm not sure I like the idea that you think you're learning how I work," he said, but I ignored him.

"It's meant to look like an accident. Or like whoever did it was interrupted, and ran away in the middle of the spell. But that's not how that works. You can't just walk away from it."

I ran though the scene downstairs, thinking about every part of it. I paced again.

"I know that. But most people wouldn't."

Harlan said nothing, tilting his head. Something cold settled in my stomach.

"That book," I said. "Wasn't the one used in the ritual. Because if things went right, they wouldn't have left it behind. And I've never known somebody like you who just leaves powerful tomes out where anyone can find them."

"How many people like me have you known?" Harlan asked. I ignored him.

"The metal pieces and the bones," I bit my lip, gripped my chin. "They look like spell parts, but they don't do anything, they're just distractions. The candles, maybe, and the paint..."

I looked out the window into the darkness beyond the glass.

"No footprints in the paint," I said. "Which means the ceiling leaked after they left..."

The thudding, the shriek, after I turned on the faucet...

"Shit!" I shoved past Harlan.

"Really, kid?" I heard him ask, but I'd made it to the stairs.

Over the thump of my shoes, I heard him follow me down, towards the parlor. I scooped up a long piece of wood off the floor without breaking stride, my good hand holding onto it tight. Turning to Harlan, I pointed at the ceiling with it.

"That's not water."

I pointed to the table.

"And that's not paint."

Harlan was almost smiling. "Then what is it?"

I looked at the ceiling.

"Blood."

I launched the wooden spike into the ceiling. Air rushed through the room as something gave way. Wooden beams burst apart, I hid my face with my coat. A noxious scent hit me, something wet and foul and indescribable beyond that, heavy enough I almost choked.

It dropped onto the table. With a howl it dropped onto the table, and crushed it beneath its massive bulk.

It screamed.

I raised my head, and stared.

My legs trembled. I'd never seen anything like that before. I can only put together pieces of that monstrous body. It was bigger than me, bigger than any human, with an oozing iridescent shell. A pale, gaping jaw in a head flat as sideways paper. Claws scraping and shaking from what seemed like dozens of tiny pockets inside the flesh of it. Gills, screaming with every wet movement, pushing bubbles free from within it. The bone white flesh things clung to the shell, and some had been scattered around the room, long tendrils flailing, teeth chattering hard enough to break.

The water pipe... it stuck out beneath the shell, pressing against the square, bulbous head. The head tossed, its jaw opening and closing. If it had eyes, maybe it would've looked at me, but it didn't.

I couldn't look away.

"Good show, detective!" Harlan clapped a hand on my shoulder. "I'd begun to worry. No, that's a lie. I knew you could do it."

"What is that thing?" I whispered.

"Not from Earth, I'm sure about that."

"Are those things on it-"

"The parasites? Yes, they've been spreading around the building through this. They can't make it outside, its not wet enough, so it's not a big-"

"It's dying," I said.

Harlan paused.

"Yes," he said. "It's dying."

"How long will that take?" I forced myself to look at him.

I couldn't read his expression.

He shrugged.

"A few minutes. A few hours. A few decades. Who can say?"

"And those things..."

"Would've already spread to the whole town, if they could."

Harlan stared at me. I stared at the beast.

"Give me my gun," I said.

Harlan burst into laughter. Laughed as if I'd told the best joke he'd heard in years. Maybe I had.

"What?" he said. "I didn't hear you right."

"Give me my gun," I repeated. "I won't let it suffer."

Harlan stopped laughing. He stared at me.

"You're joking," he said, like he knew I wasn't. "That's a carnivore, detective. You don't need to give it any pity. If it landed on you, it'd eat you."

I stared at him.

I stared at the beast. It's twitching claws, its shuddering gills, it's jaw, snapping in air. It was never meant to taste the air, to feel a draft on its skin. Somewhere down in the depths of some horrible dark waters, it belonged. Safe. Hungry. Oblivious.

As Harlan circled behind me, I didn't tear my eyes away. His arms wrapped around me. His hands glided down to my wrists, and raised them. My gun in his hand. My bad hand propping it up. His fingers warm, moving mine into place.

He aimed, and took the safety off.

I pulled the trigger.

Blood rushed through the gills, spilled onto the floor. The great beast gave a hideous shudder, and the head hit the floor with a thud.

Shadows formed on the wall, cast on the motionless being. Mine and his, dangerously intertwined. Yellow sunlight flowed through the window directly behind us. I almost sagged. Morning already?

The smell was worse now.

Harlan released me, tucking my gun into his pocket.

"Now that went well, didn't it?"

From another pocket, he pulled a cigarette carton. I watched as he pulled a match box from the same pocket, and struck it. He lit the cigarette between his lips, turned, and raised the flame to a patch of bubbles. They caught, burned with a dangerous yellow light. He tossed the match aside.

"Let's go, Core."

He grabbed my arm, hard enough to bruise, and pulled. I let him. I let him drag me from that wretched house, away from the pathetic monster and all the hideous things it brought to Arkham with it. I didn't say a word, didn't scream, as he forced me into the front seat of a car. Behind us, the house burned like a second sun.

"Where are you taking me?" I whispered.

Harlan just smiled around his cigarette.

Bumpy roads and silence stretched on. My body felt... strange. Like all my strings had been cut but one, and I'd been left to dangle in midair. Yet my thoughts remained clear, or maybe clearer, now I was out of that place. My eyes fluttered. Maybe, I fell asleep, for a moment.

"It was a trap," I said.

I didn't realize I'd spoken aloud. Maybe I didn't. Harlan didn't speak, but stared at me from the corner of his eye.

"The house... the mother... the kid..."

Was it my imagination, or was Harlan smiling?

"She, the woman, whoever she was, came to the agency, knowing my boss would shove the job onto me. She gave me a description of myself as a kid, knowing I wouldn't think twice, because I'd expect to be described at that age as a girl. The path led me to that house. And if you hadn't been there-"

I choked on my words. Harlan stayed silent.

"If you hadn't been there," I repeated. "I would've stepped right up to the table, set off the trap, and been crushed, devoured, or both, by that thing."

"You figured that out fast," Harlan said, his eyes locked on the road.

"But why?" I never wanted my gun more than I did now. "Why did you do it? You tricked me just to spare me? That isn't like you."

Harlan took a drag on his cigarette. "You're right. It's not like me. Because I wasn't the one who set that trap."

I stared.

"It wasn't me," Harlan repeated. He stopped the car at a red light. Stared at me. "By the thousand forms of the Crawling Chaos, I swear, it wasn't me. I wouldn't kill you yet, Lazarus. I'm having too much fun."

"But-"

"But you have no other enemies," he said. Tilted his head, looked me in the eye. "Not at your age. Isn't that right?"

The smoke from his cigarette wrapped around me, and something inside me went cold.

"But maybe," Harlan said. "Maybe you did when you were younger."

I didn't say anything. He turned back to the road. The sunlight glowed on the blooming flowers, the budding leaves, and I didn't feel any warmth at all.

"Listen, kid. Detective. Lazarus Core - whatever your name is." He took a drag on the cigarette, exhaled it all out. "I pulled some strings, back in New York City, when you first showed up in town. Figured a guy like you would have a reputation, even in a big place like that. I mean, you're... unmistakable. Felt like I'd find out more about you from your old friends, back there."

I stared forward, never turning my head from the road.

"You know what I found interesting?" Harlan said. He didn't wait for a reply. "You came out of nowhere. Only fifteen years old, already cut your hair, wearing slacks, fresh off the boat,

running around getting into trouble no kid that age should be involved in."

He drew in another breath on the cigarette.

"But you never stepped off the boat, Lazarus. Your papers are fake. Your accent is wrong. You got a hand you won't let anyone look at. And you know things. You think you're hiding how much you know, but I'm not fooled. You *know things*, kid. And you think you're safe by pretending you don't."

"What are you saying, Harlan?"

He smiled. Tossed his cigarette out the window.

"I'm saying you ran away from something, and it was probably for a good reason. And, of course, it's not any of my business why you did it."

He glanced at me, and his eyes chilled me.

"But it's not easy to summon a thing like that from the Lake of Hali, on the shores of which sits forever lost Carcosa. To pull a creature from that lake, from the same waters it is said the King in Yellow emerged to claim his throne on that distant planet, would require a knowledge that is only given on Carcosa itself, to those who have earned a place in the Court. And only to those who need it."

He stared at me.

"What the hell have you done, for someone to need it?"

He parked the car. I jolted with the stop, looked around. He'd parked outside Keller and Queen's, the sign on the door glimmering in the fading dark.

"One other thing," Harlan said beside me. "When talking about the trap... You didn't mention the music."

I looked at him. "So you did hear that!"

He raised his eyebrows, waiting. I set my teeth and turned forward in my seat.

"It was calling me, wasn't it?" I said. "That house didn't have a balcony. That door..."

"Kind of a metaphor, I suppose, the whole thing was," Harlan said. "Investigate, and die. Follow the music..."

Harlan waited. I didn't finish the sentence. He chuckled.

"You're a funny bastard." My gun, he shoved it into my lap. "Get out of my car."

I didn't need to be told twice.

As I stumbled towards the door, the car window rolled down.

"Lazarus!" Harlan called. When our eyes met, he smiled like a viper. "You owe me one."

I watched him drive off, my heart sinking. But he was right. He'd saved my life, for his own amusement, but he did. And now I'd have to repay him, or face the consequences.

With a curse, I forced my way into the office.

Keller came by that morning, mortified. The woman who hired me, of course, didn't exist. Neither did her precious son. I tuned out his stammered words, said all the right things, and let myself relax in my tiny, crappy office. Carmine and I traded glances, but that's all we did, all we could do, until the end of the day. I didn't mind. I needed time to think. Time to decide what to tell her.

I didn't tell her anything. She'll hate me for it someday, but I think she'll get it too. Me and her, we're not runaways from nothing. We ran to lock the last doors to our pasts. But locks get broken all the time in this town. And some things that should stay in the dark, don't always do.